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Cop talk

Tampa-based LEOaffairs.com gives police personnel all over the world a chance to rant.

by **Alex Pickett** August 27, 2008



TOP COP MODERATORS: Chip DeBlock and Jim Preston run the law enforcement info site, LEOAffairs.com.

Credit: Courtesy Chip DeBlock

Police departments are notoriously secret organizations. Sometimes even the cops inside are clueless about the week's scuttlebutt.

Other professions — customer service representatives, construction workers, retail clerks — share water cooler talk, lunch breaks and perhaps personal websites to vent their frustrations and notify co-workers of outside events.

But as city employees, whose boss is often chosen by a political leader, police officers don't have an outlet. They work varied shifts, many times alone, with little time to interact with fellow officers. The police administration regulates internal memos and bulletin boards. And, either through policy or unspoken threats of retribution, officers are barred from talking to the media or even maintaining personal websites that talk about their jobs.

Six years ago, two Tampa police officers discovered a way to crack the code of silence. Detective Chip DeBlock and TPD veteran James Preston created a website that provided police officers a space to vent frustrations, espouse opinions and notify fellow cops about issues that mattered to them.

Since then, say the two officers, LEOAffairs.com has been an overwhelming success. Funded by advertisements, it has grown from its Tampa roots to represent 400 agencies in 12 countries. Last month, over 17 million people visited the site, says Preston.

"We can't believe this little idea has grown into this," he says.

Preston, who retired a year after the site went live, attributes the site's popularity to the isolation police officers often feel. "They just don't have the opportunity to have a social atmosphere with other officers."

In addition to an Officer's Bill of Rights and tips on Internal Affairs investigations, LEOaffairs.com offers agency-specific message boards that allow cops to post questions and comments anonymously.

"We kind of did it as an experiment," DeBlock says. "We had a lot of guys that had stuff [that was] candid in nature that they couldn't talk openly about."

The experiment was so successful that officers at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and the St. Petersburg Police Department requested their own pages.

"They needed it," Preston says of SPPD. At that time, he explains, St. Pete's officers were clamoring for shotguns in their vehicles and a four-day week (standard in most other agencies), but police administrators balked at the requests.

But once SPPD officers began posting their complaints on LEOaffairs, the media took hold of the story. Within three weeks, public outcry prompted city officials to grant the officers' requests.

"If we didn't make it available to everybody, it'd just be a bunch of complaining cops and nothing would come of it," says DeBlock.

Although the site is not just for complaints — officers use LEOaffairs to post information on officers killed in the line of duty, fundraisers and as an easy way to connect with cops who might have moved away — the majority of local posts reflect the frustrations of overworked, underpaid civil servants.

“What in the almighty f#\$% is going on with the witches in the Comm Center?” rants “Hot Fuzz” on the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office message board. “They have all lost their bleedin’ minds!!! They don’t answer the radio when deputies call in until the third time. They get pissy when we see priority calls come up on the pending call screen and take it. And the call takers have lost control of what address corelates [sic] to the calls!!!”

Or from the ever-popular SPPD message board: “In an incredible show of JellyFishing, our Governor The Fantastic Tan Crist, has collapsed yet again to a Terrorist Group called the Ihurus [sic],” writes “Collapsing Charlie,” on the governor’s decision to look into the Javon Dawson shooting. “While leaving his disposable testicles in a jar by his bed he showed the Pinellas/Pasco State Attorney, Bernie McCabe, the amount of confidence he has in his ability to fairly and thoroughly investigate a major case.”

“You get some knuckleheads that post stupid things,” Preston acknowledges, “but there are some real serious issues being discussed on there.”

Not surprisingly, DeBlock and Preston have waged court battles over the site. In 2005, the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office sued LEOaffairs over several posts that violated the sheriff’s office codes of conduct. As part of the lawsuit, Sheriff David Gee attempted to subpoena the IP addresses of supposed deputies who posted negative comments about the HCSO. After a protracted court battle, a judge ruled against the sheriff’s office.

“We’ve never had to divulge an IP address ever,” DeBlock says.

The only restrictions on LEOaffairs is a terms of use agreement that gives site moderators the right to remove posts that are “abusive,

obscene, vulgar, slanderous, hateful, threatening, sexually-orientated or any other material that may violate any laws.”

Preston and DeBlock aren't limiting future efforts to law enforcement. By next year, they hope to launch similar websites for firefighters and teachers.

“If it works good with the police,” Preston says, “why not the fire department and the teachers?”

[Read how one SPPD officer's LEOaffairs posts got him into trouble.](#)

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